

Status and Occurrence of Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*) is a small species of alcid that is found in the Beringia Region of Alaska and Russia (Gaston and Jones 1998). The population in Alaska is estimated at 3 million birds and the Russian population is estimated to be at least 2 million birds (Gaston and Jones 1998). The Crested Auklet breeds in remote islands in the Aleutians, from Krenitzen Island, west to Buldir Island, and in the central and northern Bering Sea on the Pribilof Islands, St. Mathew Island, St. Lawrence Island, King Island, Little Diomede Island, in the Bering Strait; and also on Shumagin Island in the Gulf of Alaska (Sowls *et al.* 1978, Gaston and Jones 1998). In Russia, the Crested Auklet nests in the Kuril Islands, including Chirinkotan Island, Lovushki Island, Raykoke Island, Matua, Torporkov Island, Rassua Island, Ushishir Island, Simushir Island, and Chernye Brat'ya Island (Gaston and Jones 1998). This species is also found breeding in the Sea of Okhotsk on Iona Island, Sakhalin Island, Talan Island, Matykil' Island, Yama Island and Shantar Island (Gaston and Jones 1998). In the western Bering Sea, the Crested Auklet also breeds on Commander Island, along the southeastern coast of the Chukotka Peninsula, and on Big Diomede Island in the Bering Strait (Gaston and Jones 1998). In winter, most birds move south of the pack-ice; however, some birds winter in ice locked areas of the Sea of Okhotsk (Gaston and Jones 1998). In Far Eastern Asia, the Crested Auklet winters in large numbers around the central Kuril Islands, Sakhalin Island, and northern Japan around northern Hokkaido, and northern Honshu (Gaston and Jones 1998, Brazil 2009). This species is accidental in the pelagic waters off China (Brazil 2009). In Alaska, the Crested Auklet winters from the Aleutian Islands east to Kodiak Island (Gaston and Jones 1998). Birds have been found in Russia well out of the species' normal range with a record from Wrangell Island (Gaston and Jones 1998). In Alaska, the Crested Auklet is a rarity anywhere in the state away from its core ranges (West 2008) with 1 remarkable inland record of a bird found 600 km up the Yukon River (Gaston and Jones 1998).

Along the west coast south of Alaska, the Crested Auklet is an accidental species with very few records. In British Columbia, there are only six provincial records including skin specimen records and photographed records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There is a hypothetical record for Washington State of a dead bird found near "Vance" which is thought by recent authors Wahl *et al.* (2005) to most likely refer to Grays Harbour County on 29 June 1939 (Nickelsen 1942). In Jewett *et al.* (1953), this record was considered hypothetical because the origin of the bird was uncertain. This record should be re-examined by the current Washington Bird Records Committee and could become an accepted state record due to our current better understanding of vagrancy by Alaskan Alcids south of their breeding range (Wahl *et al.* 2005).

There are no records for Oregon (OFO 2012). There are 2 accepted records for California by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The first record was of an adult male found in the surf only to be found the next day dead, 6 km north of Bolinas, Marin County from July 16-17, 1979 (Weyman 1980). The second state record was of an adult female photographed off Bodega Head in Sonoma on June 24, 1995 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There is also a record from the waters off the Baja Peninsula in Mexico of an adult in breeding plumage found 9 miles East Southeast of Cedros Island on July 7, 1980 (Pitman *et al.* 1983).

Incredibly there are 2 records of the Crested Auklet for Europe with an adult in breeding plumage collected northwest of Iceland in August 1912 (Hørring 1933, Sealy and Carter 2012). The second bird was an adult female collected from western Greenland, probably near Nuuk (formerly Godthåb, 64°11'N, 5°45'W), sometime between the years 1968 and 1972, as the exact date is not clear (Sealy and Carter 2012).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Crested Auklet is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a small, chunky, long winged, all dark and highly gregarious alcid that can be found in amongst other alcid species or on its own (Jones 1993a). The Crested Auklet is 23 cm (9 inches) in length with a 43 cm (17 inches) wingspan, and an average weight of 285 g (10 ounces) (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In the context of British Columbia, this species is very distinct at any age and should not give observers any identification challenges. Readers are encouraged to check out Gaston and Jones (1998) for how to separate the Crested Auklet from the small Alaskan Alcids.

Adult birds hold their breeding plumage from April to September (Sibley 2000). This species is uniformly dark gray overall: with the wings, back of the neck and head appearing much darker than the breast (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is heavy-bodied with rather long wings and a large head (Gaston and Jones 1998). The crown is flat with a large shaggy crest that curls over the bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill has bright reddish-orange bill plates (Jones 1993a). The eyes are white, and there is a single long white plume that extends from below the eye down the neck (Sibley 2000). The legs and feet are also dark gray like the body, and in flight protrude past the tail (Sibley 2000). Adult birds hold their winter plumage from October to April (Sibley 2000). These birds, like birds in breeding plumage, are uniformly dark gray overall with the wings, back of the neck and head appearing much darker than the breast (Jones 1993a, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The shaggy crest plumes are reduced in overall length and protrude straight up above a reddish bill which has the colour reduced as it lacks the bill plates of breeding plumage (Gaston and Jones 1998, Sibley 2000). The eyes are white with a

faint white plume that extends from behind the eye and down the neck (Gaston and Jones 1998, Sibley 2000).

Sub-adult birds in their second year hold this plumage in the summer months only and have shorter crests and smaller bills than adults (Jones 1993b). Both sexes look similar to each other, but the males have larger and more strongly hooked bills (Jones 1993b), and in at least one population longer crests than females (Jones 1993b).

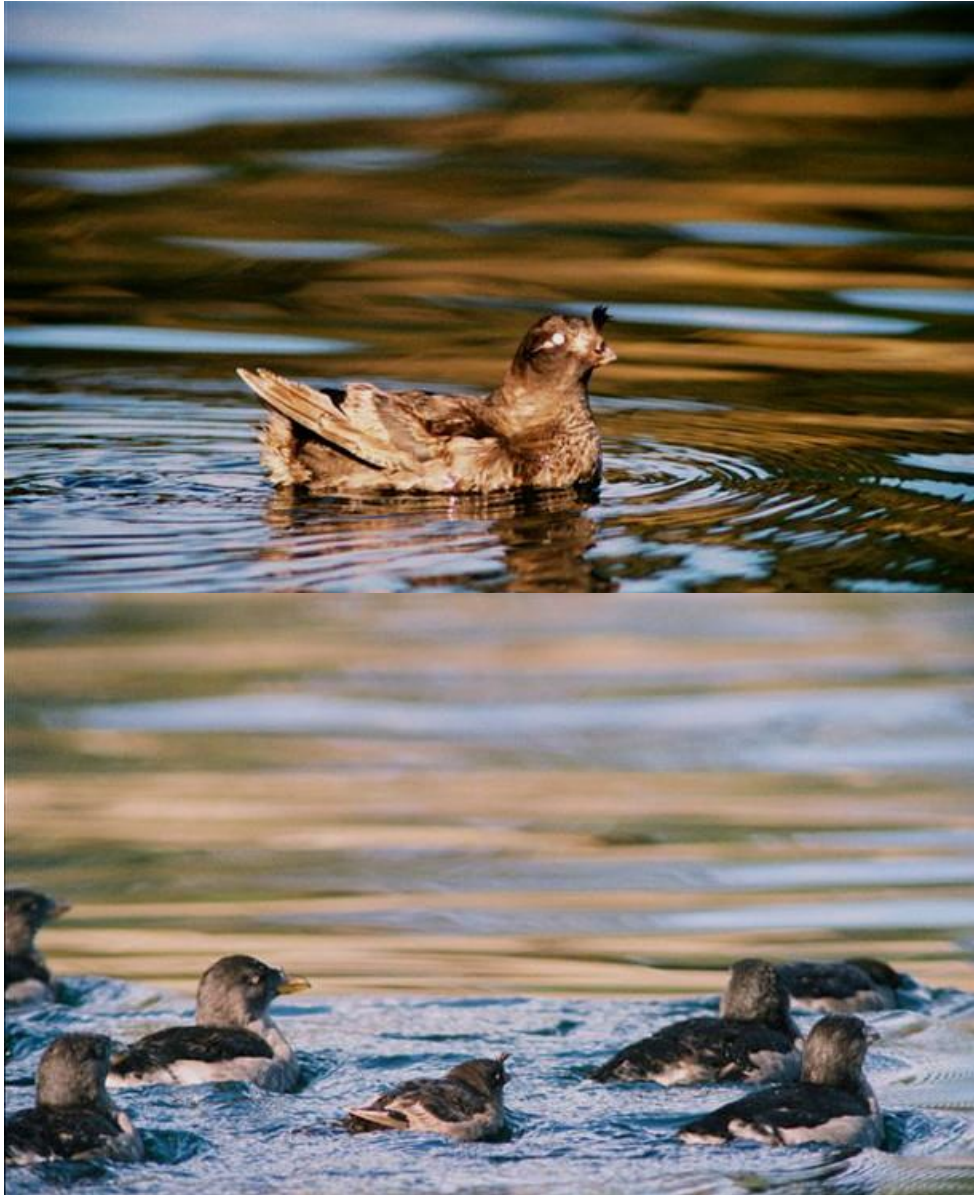
Juvenile birds hold this plumage from August to March (Sibley 2000). At this age, the crest plume is very short, the eyes are pale with a dingy tinge, and the bill is small and dark (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

At sea and in the winter months, the distinctive ornaments are usually not visible, and the bill is smaller and duller without accessory plates making identification more difficult (Jones 1993a). Crested Auklets, however, always have entirely dark sooty-gray plumage, and thus lack the whitish lower belly and vent found on Cassin's Auklet (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*), Parakeet Auklet (*Aethia psittacula*), and Whiskered Auklet (*Aethia pygmaea*), and fly relatively fast and purposefully on longer pointed wings (Jones 1993a).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Crested Auklet is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with only 6 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are too few records to establish a pattern of vagrancy. The first record for British Columbia was collected during the winter of 1892-93 by a sealer named J. M. Lindley in the waters north west of Kyuquot Sound, along the northern coast of Vancouver Island (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This record represents the earliest known record of a Crested Auklet found outside of Alaska in North American waters (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). The second record was mentioned as a hypothetical in Brooks and Swarth (1925) where it was stated that in "May, 1912, when passing around the north end of Vancouver Island from the inside passage, a number of very small auklets with recurved crests were seen by Messrs. C. deB. Green, W. S. Burton and the late Warburton Pike. The birds were close at hand, viewed from the deck of a small launch, and the crests ('like the crest of a California Quail') were distinctly seen". This record is included in this write up as it is possible that this species might have come further south in the winter at that time and headed north in the spring with the same pattern seen by Parakeet Auklet. Though the description lacks certain details it does mention the distinct crest of the Crested Auklet which is a very obvious marking on this species. The third record was found and photographed by Amelie Rousseau and Jukka Jantunen in water channel off Cape Calver in Metchosin from September 5-October 3, 2003 (Cecile 2004a, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This bird was seen by many lucky

observers (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). Photographs showed this bird to be a 2nd year bird (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The fourth record for British Columbia was of an adult in winter plumage seen through telescopes at close range in a rip tide line and found by Margo Hearne and Peter Hamel while conducting a waterbird survey at Entry Point, in Old Masset on December 27, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The bird was initially observed at close range before it was quickly carried further out and away from the shoreline by the current, and as a result photographs were not obtained (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The fifth provincial record was of an adult found and photographed by Orin Lawson and Jason Feaver on a whale watching boat near Cleland Island off Tofino from July 31-August 1, 2013 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The sixth record for British Columbia was of an adult found and photographed by Mike Sheehan 100m south of Discovery Island off Victoria on September 8, 2013 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). It is interesting that the 2003 and 2013 records from the Victoria area occurred in the exact same time frame. The Crested Auklet has been found mostly on its own in British Columbia waters, but the bird that spent the month of September 2003 off Cape Calvert in Metchosin was with flocks of Rhinoceros Auklets (J. Jantunen Pers. Comm.). Observers should be diligent and carefully scrutinize flocks of alcids or individual birds in the hopes of finding this elusive gem. It is highly likely that this species will occur again in the future in the oceans waters somewhere along the coast of British Columbia.



Figures 1 & 2: Record #3: Crested Auklet in channel on off Cape Calver, Metchosin on September 8, 2003. Photos © Jukka Jantunen.



Figure 3: Record #5: Crested Auklet near Cleland Island off Tofino on July 30, 2003. Photo © Jason Feaver.



Figure 4: Record #6: Crested Auklet 100m south of Discovery Island off Victoria on September 8, 2013. Photo © Mike Sheehan.

Table 1: Records of Crested Auklet for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) winter 1892-93: J. M. Lindley (specimen: RBCM 11915) collected off Kyuquot Sound (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 2.(several) May, 1912: Messrs. C. de B. Green, W.S. Burton, Warburton Pike: north end of Vancouver Island (Brooks and Swarth 1925)
- 3.(1) 2nd year September 5-October 3, 2003: Amelie Rousseau, Jukka Jantunen mobs (photo) Cape Calver, RPBO, Metchosin (Whittington 2003, Cecile 2004a)
- 4.(1) winter plumage December 27, 2009: Margo Hearne, Peter Hamel: Entry Point, Old Masset (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 5.(1) adult July 31-August 1, 2013: Orin Lawson, Jason Feaver (photo) near Cleland Island off Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 6.(1) adult September 8, 2013: Mike Sheehan (photo) 100m south of Discovery Island off Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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